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Walking groups come out trumps for boosting overall health without side effects

Benefits include reductions in blood pressure, body fat, total cholesterol and depression risk

[Is there evidence that walking groups have health benefits? A systematic review and meta-analysis Online First doi 10.1136/bjsports-2014-094157]

Joining a walking group is one of the best and easiest ways to boost overall health, with virtually no side effects, suggests an analysis of the available evidence, published online in the **British Journal of Sports Medicine**.

The benefits are wide ranging, and what's more, members find it relatively easy to stick with this type of exercise regime.

The findings prompt the researchers to suggest that doctors and other healthcare professionals should recommend joining a walking group as a way of boosting health.

They assessed the available evidence from a wide range of sources on the physical and mental health consequences of joining an outdoor walking group for adults, and published up to the end of 2013.

They found 42 studies, involving almost 2000 people, which met all their criteria. Three-quarters of their haul had been published within the past decade, suggesting growing interest in the potential health benefits of walking groups.

The studies involved participants from 14 different countries, with a wide range of long term conditions, including arthritis, dementia, diabetes, fibromyalgia, obesity/overweight, mental health issues, and Parkinson's disease.

Analysis of the pooled data showed that walking groups have wide ranging benefits, above and beyond making people more physically active.

People who joined these groups registered statistically significant falls in average blood pressure, resting heart rate, body fat, weight, and total cholesterol.

The evidence was less clear-cut for reductions in other risk factors for ill health, such as waist circumference, fasting blood glucose, and blood fats.

But walkers also experienced improvements in lung power, overall physical functioning, and general fitness, and they were less depressed than before they started walking regularly.

Three quarters of all the participants stuck with the group, and there were few side effects to speak of, apart from a handful of falls on roots or wet ground.

The researchers point out that in England, at least, 29% of adults do less than 30 minutes of moderate physical activity every week, and almost one in 10 don't even manage to walk for more than five minutes at a time over a month.

Efforts by doctors to bump up total physical activity levels often fall on stony ground, they explain.

"Walking groups are effective and safe with good adherence and wide ranging health benefits," they write. "They could be a promising intervention as an adjunct to other healthcare, or as a proactive health-promoting activity."

And the social aspect of walking groups may help to foster positive attitudes towards physical activity, they suggest.

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